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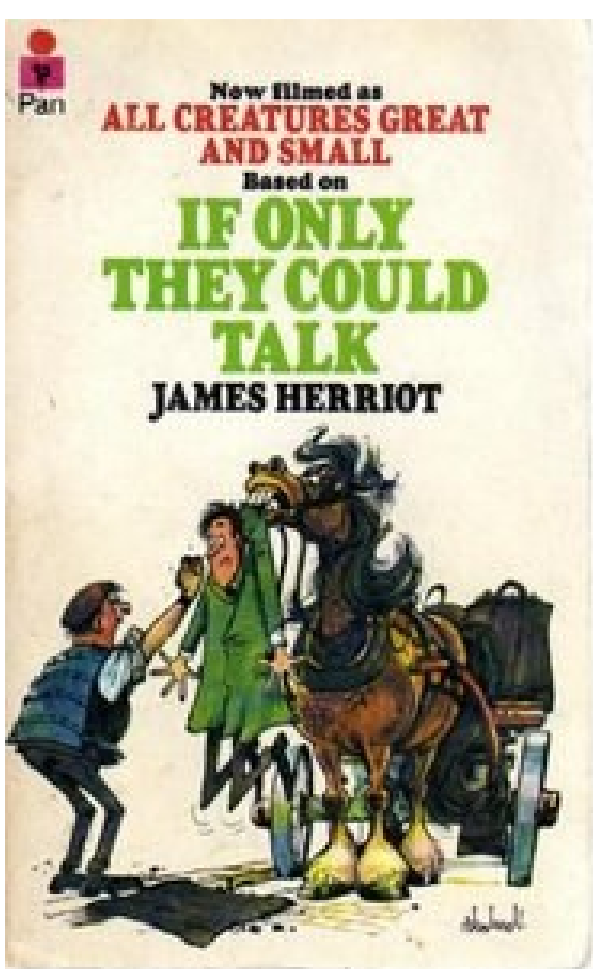




## Is Herriot History?

### *Narratives of British veterinary medicine* Andrew Gardiner

A wide range of methods and approaches are used within the field of Medical Humanities to investigate social, cultural, ethical, educational and political aspects of the practice of medicine, recognising that medicine is more than science, and medical education is more than the acquisition of an ever-expanding mass of factual data. As part of on-going research into the field of 'veterinary humanities', this poster explores one way in which narrative is created and used in veterinary medicine.



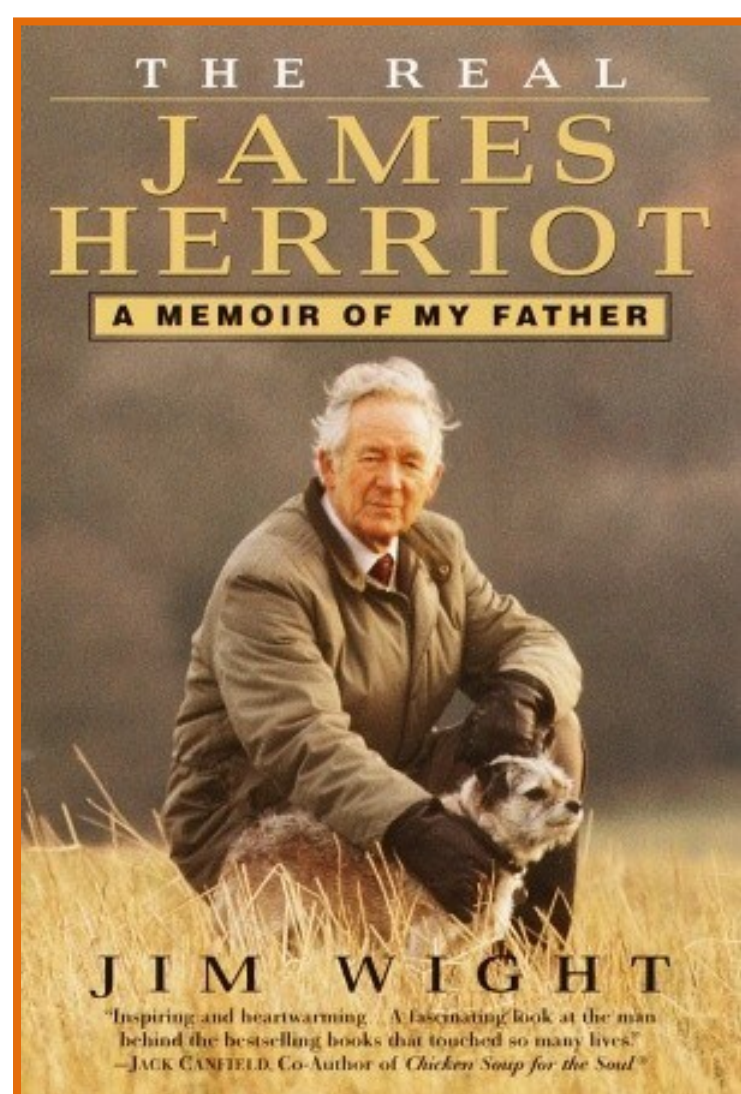
Herriot's books became part of the shared story of the veterinary profession: a generation of vets took up the career because of him.

Herriot (Alf Wight) therefore had a profound influence on veterinary education. His work affected not just how the public saw vets, but how vets saw themselves.

He was an extremely skilful humourist but his writing could also be ambiguous and melancholic. His first (unpublished) work was a much darker non-veterinary story. His vet books took off in America before reaching and remaining in the international bestseller lists.

### Anecdotalism and professional identity

Anecdote has an important role in defining and supporting professional identity. As in medicine, practitioners 'make sense' of their work, gain peer support, and reflect on their activities mainly through anecdote. This strong and enduring form of narrative is frequently shared when professionals are together. Many of Herriot's amusing (and educational) anecdotes arose from a 'common currency of narrative' that existed and was widely shared within the profession at the time he was working.



### Reading Herriot – textual analysis

- The author uses a subtle double-narrative technique in which the author voice from the present 'drops in' and comments on events from the past (a device known as *presentism*)
- The books were written in the 1970s but situated the 1930s/40s – both periods of uncertainty and social upheaval in Britain, giving the books interesting parallel contexts
- Their strong nostalgia can be read as a critique of modernity and industrialisation
- Some of his humour has a fatalistic quality to it and Wight suffered from periods of severe depression



Oral historian Sue Bradley is working with the RCVS to collect a series of oral testimony recordings to be archived in the British Library. This will be an invaluable resource for social and veterinary/medical historians.

### Uses of narrative in veterinary education

- Learning & discussing the 'art' of veterinary practice using diverse source material and personal narrative/testimony
- Providing student and practitioner support through shared experiences and sense of belonging to a professional community
- Increasing awareness of the potential of narrative medicine in clinical veterinary medicine
- Contributing to the expanding academic field of Medical Humanities
- Prompting debate: Can Herriot's narratives inform professional practice and education today? Are they a negative influence?

### Narrative approaches in action

- Degeling, C. (2012) 'Narrative medicine: learning through stories'. *Veterinary Record* **170**: 522.
- Baillie, S. (2012) 'The Class of '54: Bristol's first veterinary graduates'. Full text: <http://trust.rcvs.org.uk/grants-and-collaborations/collaborations/bristol-class-1954/>
- Bradley, S. (2013) 'Voices bringing history to life'. *Veterinary Record* **172**:357-359.